

TOM EBLEN

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# Christmas, grown in Kentucky — from unique wreaths to a 33-acre poinsettia factory



Tom Eblen is a columnist for the Lexington Herald-Leader who writes about life, people and issues in Lexington and Kentucky. A Lexington native, Eblen was the Herald-Leader's managing editor from 1998 to 2008.

Jane VanWingerden, whose father and uncle own Color Point, stands amid the poinsettias grown in the company's more than 30 acres of greenhouses in Bourbon County. **David Stephenson** -Color Point

BY TOM EBLEN

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A couple of years ago, I read a [story in a British newspaper](#) about Yiwu, China, where 600 factories churn out 60 percent of the world's Christmas decorations, most of them synthetic, cheap and cheesy.

By contrast, two local family-owned companies have found successful but very different business models by helping people deck their halls with boughs of real holly, fresh poinsettias, freshly cut trees and other natural decorations.

One company focuses on unique items with a personal touch; the other uses technology to take quality horticulture to an incredible scale of mass production.

Garden designer Joseph Hillenmeyer operates [Hillenmeyer Christmas Shop](#) each holiday season in the parking lot of the Lansdowne Shops. Since Thanksgiving week, the [shop has been open](#) 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. every day except Sundays, when it opens an hour later. The shop will close about Dec. 20 when it runs out of merchandise.

During that month, Hillenmeyer says he will sell about 3,000 fresh-cut trees, a couple thousand wreaths and hundreds more items from an ever-expanding array of garland, topiary, kissing balls, cut branches and winter floral arrangements. Most items are handmade and sourced from small nurseries in the region, with staggered deliveries scheduled to keep everything fresh.

But Hillenmeyer is selling more than decorations.

“For me, it’s the same thing as approaching a garden design,” he said. “I’m looking to evoke emotion, create an experience and pull people back from their everyday reality with the nostalgia of a ’50s Christmas.”

Hillenmeyer and his wife, Shannon, have run the shop for seven years, gradually refining the space and expanding the variety of items for sale. The shop was started in the 1990s



Joseph Hillenmeyer said his Hillenmeyer Christmas Shop has enjoyed double-digit sales growth in recent years as he has added to the variety of holiday decorations. **Tom Eblen** - [teblen@herald-leader.com](mailto:teblen@herald-leader.com)

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the space and expanding the variety of items for sale. The shop was started in the 1990s by his parents, Louis and Betsy, but the family tradition is much older.

Hillenmeyer's [great-great-grandfather opened a plant nursery in northern Fayette County in 1841](#). During the second half of the 20th century, the old Hillenmeyer Nursery was Lexington's favorite Christmas destination, with a nativity scene and petting zoo in addition to trees and wreaths.

"That was my first job; standing in front of the nativity on Sandersville Road, passing out candy canes and talking to customers as they came through," Hillenmeyer said.

He has tried to recreate that experience with a replica of the old nativity, Shetland ponies and a goat for children to pet and weekend appearances by Santa, who sits with children in a one-horse open sleigh that Hillenmeyer's great-grandfather used in the late 1800s.

"Tens and tens of thousands of kids have been in and out of this sleigh," he said. "It's been restored several times."

Although the shop has a roof and a few walls, it is basically an outdoor space. But there is always free hot cider and a fireplace where customers can warm themselves and roast marshmallows.

For the Hillenmeyers, it is a good second business during the off-season for garden design. Annual sales have been growing by double digits in recent years, he said.

"We are in this to make money, there's no question," he said. "But it's as much about the reactions and the kids and the enjoyment they get. It's an experience."

[Color Point is a family-owned plant nursery](#) started by Art and Ken VanWingerden. The company came to Bourbon County in 2000 and built three acres of greenhouses. Since then, it has grown to more than 33 acres under roof there and another 80 acres of greenhouses in Illinois.

Ninety percent of Color Point's profits are made in the spring, but it spends much of the offseason growing potted poinsettias for major Midwest retailers such as Walmart and Lowe's. This year the company, which has about 200 employees at its highly automated Bourbon County greenhouses, grew more than 230,000 poinsettias along with their Illinois location.

Chad Cagle, Kentucky's head grower, is a veteran horticulturist who happened to have worked at Hillenmeyer.

“It's the same industry, but it's totally different,” Cagle said. “This is like a factory. At most nurseries, 'bigger is better'. But here we're looking for both quality and consistency, because if plants are too big they won't ship well. You have to know the environment.”

That means carefully controlling greenhouse conditions for plant size and the timing of blooms. Then transporting the finished poinsettias in temperature-controlled trailers to make sure plants aren't damaged by cold temperatures or breezes.

The VanWingerdens' father, Aart, was a horticulturist who immigrated from the Netherlands in 1948.

“They know plants, so this came very natural to them,” said Art's daughter, Jane VanWingerden, one of several third-generation family members in the company. “They work hard, and they've made the most of what they've been given.”